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Beyond *bambole*: Female Friendship in Italian Transnational Television

Abstract

Recent television programming in Italy has begun to focus on the themes of female friendship and girlhood, moving from a long history of traditionally male-centered narratives towards stories that privilege female subjectivity. This article analyzes this recent trend by looking at three different programs: the HBO/Rai adaptation of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels *L'amica geniale*; the Netflix production *Baby*, based on the 2013 Rome teen prostitution scandal; and the web series *SKAM Italia*, based on the international series that originated in Norway. Despite their apparent distinctions in terms of target audiences, genre, and style, all three shows place the friendship between adolescent girls as their primary narrative concern. Through analyses of each series, we can see how these representations employ similar tropes in their depictions of girlhood and friendship, such as the mirroring and doubling of the female protagonists; the presence of the love triangle; the configuration of female friendship in relation to gay male characters; and the suggestion of potential lesbian desire. This article meditates on the possible motivations for this newfound focus on female subjectivity as a potential strategy for marketing Italian television worldwide.

The opening episode of *L'amica geniale* (HBO/RAI FICTION, 2018-present) depicts the initiation of a complex and intimate friendship between two child protagonists, Lila and Lenù, as they are growing up on the outskirts of Naples. Based on Elena Ferrante's bestselling tetralogy popularly known as the Neapolitan Novels, *L'amica geniale* places Lila and Lenù's friendship at the nucleus of the emotional thrust of the drama and configures their relationship as the primary vehicle for self-articulation of the two characters. This first episode of the series, entitled *Bambole*, dramatizes the initial attraction of the two young girls as they are drawn to each other by a shared recognition of their superior intelligence and scholastic abilities, qualities that separate them from the other children of their dreary, working-class milieu. Lila and Lenù's reciprocal admiration, however, does not preclude each girl's quest to establish their superior will: in the culminating event of the episode, as the girls are engaged in a typical form of feminine play exchanging their treasured dolls, Lila (the «geniale»¹ of the pair) throws Lenù's beloved doll into a basement window, a provocative act to which Lenù responds in kind. This aggressive challenge becomes a template for their future friendship, which will last long into adulthood and will be characterized by periods of profound interdependence, competitiveness, and affection.

The jettisoning of the dolls also holds a symbolic function: as the two protagonists confront the realities of female adolescence and adulthood, their disposal of one of girlhood's most stereotypically-gendered toys symbolizes their mutual desire to seek autonomy in a deeply patriarchal environment. Readers of Ferrante's novels, to which the television adaptation is generally faithful, will not be surprised at the placement of the *bambole* event at the center of the opening episode. The discarding of the dolls, however, also becomes an appealing metaphor with which to approach the topic of this essay, that is, the evermore-prominent narrative focus the theme of girlhood has gained in recent Italian transnational television. After decades of Italian television production that focused primarily upon variety and quiz shows, *sceneggiati*, and narratives of great men in history, the recent addition of original programming featuring female protagonists and their relationships with other girls is a unique development on Italian screens. Danielle Hipkins has already observed this phenomenon in contemporary Italian film comedy,

noting «a growing sense of teen female agency» (HIPKINS 2015, 252) in such productions. The transition of the theme of girlhood friendships to the small screen is a trend that has appeared more recently, but significantly it is a motif that appears to transcend traditional demographic limitations, forming the basis of programming aimed at elite and broadly popular audiences alike and spanning the range of high-to-low-brow productions. This article looks closely at the portrayal of adolescent female friendship in three otherwise-unrelated Italian series: the much-acclaimed *L'amica geniale*; the Netflix production *Baby* (2018-2020); and the web series *SKAM Italia* (TIMVISION, 2018-present). Despite their apparent distinctions in terms of target audiences, genre, and style, the plots of these series are all center upon friendship between adolescent girls and the vicissitudes and rewards of female intimacy. The new visibility of female narratives suggests Italian television's self-conscious effort to respond to the #MeToo movement and ally itself with the public investigation of female experience, particularly in regards to sexuality and gendered identity formation, themes that play out prominently in these depictions of adolescent girls. Yet in the analysis of how these programs elaborate this theme of girlhood and friendship, the question arises as to what extent viewers can be heartened by this increased focus on female subjectivities. Just as Lenù and Lila make a grand gesture by discarding their dolls, is Italian television programming indicating a willingness to go beyond *bambole* and embrace more nuanced visions of female adolescence?

L'amica geniale

Perhaps most distinct amongst of the three series is *L'amica geniale*, an international co-production between Rai Fiction and HBO that in many ways is further evidence of quality television production in Italy that reaffirms the Italian television industry's transnational turn towards series intended to resonate with both domestic and global audiences (BARRA AND SCAGLIONI 2016; DUNLEAVY 2020). This collaboration constitutes a significant step forward for the Rai network, signaling its determination to move beyond its history of producing predictable middle-brow fiction that speak primarily to Italian audiences and instead propelling the network to the pantheon of artistically-

nuanced series typically associated with the internationally-oriented productions of pay networks. HBO's shared investment in the project reflects the network's recent interest in the production and distribution of European content in the original language as well as prestige television's new emphasis on literary adaptation. Yet the portfolio of HBO originals does not suggest that a series focusing primarily upon the friendship between two girls would be anything other than a commercial risk. While there are precedents, particularly in American television, for series in which two female friends occupy the center of the narrative, television shows that foreground female friendship either belong to popular genres, such as comedy, science fiction, or police procedural, or else they must rely upon recognizable female stars, a phenomenon that has remained consistent since first observed by Lynn Spangler in one of the earliest studies on female friendship on television (SPANGLER 1989, 2003). *L'amica geniale* does not fit such precedents: as a drama that critics often situate within the tradition of Italian Neorealism, the series specifically seeks authenticity through the casting of unknown actors, and unlike other Italian productions that appeal to international audiences through picturesque visions of Italy, *L'amica geniale* avoids a focus on recognizable landmarks and opts for a rigorous use of Neapolitan dialect. Certainly the show's literary pedigree was the most significant factor contributing to the production of *L'amica geniale* and HBO's investment in collaborating with Rai Fiction. The series' reception was primed by the success of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels before the show's premiere in 2018, so much so that its marketing campaign was launched in the US with a monumental billboard in the middle of New York City's Times Square that featured silhouettes of the two girls holding hands while running through an indistinct Neapolitan cityscape.

As this billboard suggests, *L'amica geniale* consistently affirms the relationship between the two female protagonists as the most compelling element of the drama. The series establishes the bond between the two girls when it begins with a flash-forward to the moment when the sexagenarian Lenù discovers that Lila, with whom she has been out of touch for years, has disappeared, apparently abandoning her family and destroying evidence of her past. As the older Lenù sits down and begins to write her memories, we hear her voiceover narration that will accompany the rest of the series, echoing the

first-person voice of the original novels and affirming that the female perspective will be dominant. This will not just be Lenù's story, however, for in this opening monologue she adopts the second person to address the absent Lila and proclaim that she will write both hers and Lila's memories of their past, using all of the confidences that Lila has shared over the years. In this way the series assures a dual female subjectivity in which the girlhood friendship is the essential link between the two women's sometimes diverging narratives.

The first two seasons of *L'amica geniale* cover the first two novels of Ferrante's tetralogy, which follow Lila and Lenù's childhood up through their adolescence, when Lila becomes courted by many young men in the neighborhood and Lenù harbors a long crush on her classmate, the disinterested intellectual Nino Sarratore. Throughout the years the girls sustain each other through the respective abuse of their families and encourage each other in their intellectual pursuits, even attempting to write a novel together as an affirmation of their shared literary ambitions. In the second season Lenù continues her secondary education and pursues a potential romance with Nino, while Lila is unhappily married to the abusive Stefano, the brutish son of a Camorra loan shark. The young women's relationship is strained to the breaking point however when Lila suddenly embarks on a dangerous but passionate adulterous affair with Nino. This breach of the girls' friendship serves as a particularly painful form of betrayal for Lenù, yet the impasse it creates is inextricably related to the continuous push-and-pull of the girls' ongoing intellectual as well as sexual rivalry.

The love triangle between Lila-Nino-Lenù references a long literary tradition of complicated female friendships, particularly in Victorian literature, in which heterosexual romance threatens the homosocial bond shared by women. Yet in many respects their shared fascination with the cerebral Nino configures him as a surrogate for the two girl's quest for intellectual status in a culture where female erudition is generally disdained. The mutual object of their sexual desire becomes an example of the doubling of the two female characters and their continued efforts to become more like each other. For Lenù in particular her own sexual activity is inspired by Lila, whose lack of inhibition to act upon her desires inspires the timorous Lenù to model herself after her friend. This is already apparent in the series' first episode when Lenù throws Lila's doll into

the basement window, asserting «Quello che fai tu faccio io»². This becomes the mantra of their adolescent development, and in fact it is on Lila's wedding night that Lenù attempts to have sex with her boyfriend Antonio, a quest inspired not by romantic passion but by her effort to be more like Lila, as the voiceover explains, «Volevo essere penetrata, volevo dire a Lila al suo ritorno, “anch'io non sono più vergine, *quello che fai tu faccio io*, non riuscirai a lasciarmi indietro”»³ (emphasis mine). The confusion between Lenù's own sexual activity and her desire to be like Lila, or to not be abandoned by her, becomes further entangled in a series of episodes that takes place while the young women are vacationing on Ischia. Here Lenù finds happiness not only through the presence of Nino but by the creation of an intimate triad with him and Lila, a temporary state of bliss that inevitably becomes ruptured once Lila decides to consummate her romantic interest in Nino. At that moment Lenù too decides to lose her virginity with Nino's lecherous father Donato, and it is unclear the degree to which Donato serves as a substitute for Nino or if Lenù is attempting to emulate Lila's own physical experiences.

That Lenù and Lila wish to become absorbed within one another is rendered visually through the series, not just in the way the girls are frequently shown in close-ups facing each other in profile, but also in shots in which one scene will fade-out from the face of one only to overlap with a fade-in to the face of the other. More noticeably, one scene features a shot with Lila's profile overlapped with a head-on framing of Lenù, a replica of the famous still from the Ingmar Bergman film *Persona* (1966). Such framings are reminiscent of how Lila and Lenù's intimacy channels the way the protagonists of Bergman's film seek to reinvent their personalities within each other, both returning to and negating their past memories. Like the protagonists of *Persona*, both Lila and Lenù explore and are challenged by their experiences of sexuality and motherhood, and they use each other to filter and reflect on their experiences. What results is a depiction of female friendship as a volatile admixture of rejection and desire.

Baby

Female friendship and the vicissitudes of girlhood may be a unique recipe for success in a big-budget dramatic series like *L'amica geniale*, but it is a staple element of teen drama and is frequently the subject of series that focus upon adolescence and coming-of-age. This is the modality of *Baby*, which premiered in 2018 and became the second Netflix original produced in Italy following the success of the crime show *Suburra* (2017-2020). Just as *L'amica geniale* shares a gritty Neapolitan setting with *Gomorra la serie*, *Baby* mimics *Suburra* by capitalizing on a portrayal of the decadent and secret transgressions that take place below the glitzy image of contemporary Rome. Unlike *L'amica geniale*, which is indebted to its literary patrimony, *Baby* originates in a *fatto di cronaca*: the infamous «baby squillo» scandal of 2013 involving two girls from the Parioli district of Rome who became involved in an underage sex ring. While the subject matter lends itself to prurient representations, the series steers its focus toward the psychological preconditions that lead the two female protagonists, Chiara and Ludovica, to prostitution as they simultaneously forge an intimate, intensely allied emotional bond with each other.

At first glance *Baby* seems to emulate other popular series that focus upon the misdeeds of wealthy teenagers behaving badly, including *Gossip Girl* (US, 2007-2012), *13 Reasons Why* (US, 2017-2020) and *Elite* (Spain, 2018-present). The series' up-to-the-minute electronic soundtrack, fashionable costumes, and reliance on familiar narrative tropes of teen drama, including romantic infatuation, drug use, parental neglect, bullying, gossip, and rivalry, have made it a must-see show for teenage girls in particular. Yet *Baby*'s slowly developed character portraits and in-depth exploration of the inner worlds of two troubled young women also promises a greater crossover appeal that could intrigue older viewers, effectively combining the aesthetics of stylish, sexy teen romance with finely wrought drama in order to overcome the limitations of the teen series and reach a wider audience.

In its opening scene, which features a series of establishing shots of the Roman skyline, *Baby* announces it is rooted in a female point of view as we hear the voiceover of Chiara, a wealthy, attractive, and bright private school student, warning that the privileged lives she and her peers lead mask a desperate internal malaise: «Se hai sedici anni e vivi nel quartiere più bello di Roma, sei

fortunato. Il nostro è il migliore dei mondi possibili. Siamo immersi in questo acquario bellissimo, ma sogniamo il mare. Ecco perché per sopravvivere abbiamo bisogno di una vita segreta».⁴ The scene cuts to Chiara waking up in bed with a teenage boy, Nico, whom she quickly ushers out of her apartment before her parents can see. The shame in the relationship, we soon learn, is not only that Nico has a steady girlfriend but that he is also the brother of Chiara's best friend Camilla, who is unaware of the affair. This secrecy as betrayal of the two girls' friendship establishes a significant theme of the series, as Chiara and Camilla's eventual falling out will be supplanted by a deeper and more emotionally dependent bond between Chiara and Ludovica, which develops precisely as they become drawn into their own secret world of prostitution.

Similar to the dyadic construction of the female friends in *L'amica geniale*, the first season of *Baby* focuses upon the parallels between best friends Camilla and Chiara as intellectual, social, and athletic equals. In the first episode they are seen running together head-to-head during their track team practice, and we soon learn they are both applying for an opportunity to study in the United States in the upcoming year. Unlike Lila and Lenù, the two girls appear comfortable with their mutual success, but when Chiara's affair with Nico becomes public knowledge, their friendship becomes strained. The emergence of a love triangle causes a further rift in their closeness as Camilla begins to pursue a relationship with Damiano, a new student and a stereotypical «bad boy» on whom Chiara harbors a crush. The misfit Damiano however is more drawn to the emotionally fragile Chiara, and he will soon leave Camilla to form a relationship with Chiara. Ultimately though it is not the rivalry over Damiano that challenges the girls' friendship, but because Chiara's compulsion towards sexual transgression contrasts to Camilla's confidently feminist ethos. In fact Chiara's newfound friendship with Ludovica is cemented when the latter is humiliated by the public viewing of a sex video in which she is participant, an incident that inspires Chiara's pity yet also draws her closer to Ludovica. By contrast, Camilla perceives the incident as a betrayal to female progress: «Ecco come buttare secoli di lotta femminista con un video».⁵ The series thus establishes two potential friendship paths for Chiara: the rational, progressive one embodied by Camilla, and the sexualized, retrograde one that is symbolized by Ludovica. As it soon becomes clear, it will be the latter alliance that will

prevail and form the most consistent emotional connection throughout the series.

SKAM Italia

Another teen-oriented program that is centered upon female friendship is the web series *SKAM Italia*, the Italian remake of the popular Norwegian program. The series was one of the first productions of the streaming platform TIMVision, and it adopts a uniquely agile form of distribution that is clearly oriented towards a teenage demographic. Rather than being streamed in full-length episodes, the series originally premiered by dropping individual scenes at random moments throughout the months of the first season, each scene bearing a time and date stamp that reflected both the moment in which the scene was supposed to be occurring as well as the time that the viewer was given access. A prime example of transmedia storytelling, characters on the show have profiles on Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp that mirror and embellish scenes from the series so that fans can follow the characters beyond the temporal restrictions of the show.

Whereas *L'amica geniale* and *Baby* focus primarily on the interrelationships of two female leads, *SKAM Italia* takes a choral approach, looking at the extended friendships of a group of students at the Liceo Kennedy in Rome and alternating the perspective and focus on a different character each season. However, the thread that underlines the series is the enduring friendship amongst a group of five girls, a crew that becomes known as «Le matte»,⁶ and as each girl engages with her own personal struggles the female chorus is used as a means of support and affirmation. Just like in *L'amica geniale* and *Baby*, the first episode of the show is inaugurated by a female voice, who tells us: «Ore...centinaia, migliaia di ore, a non fare niente, a cercare di piacere agli altri».⁷ While the unidentified girl continues to speak about the futility and frustrations of teen existence, we see a montage of handheld footage showing various characters from the program clowning around and laughing. Like in *Baby*, we are given a sense of contrast between the outward appearance of carefree teen life that masks a more profound angst. The amateur quality of the imagery also gives a sense of immediacy and familiarity, encouraging audiences

to imagine that they themselves could be the ones filming these friends with their own mobile phones.

This sense of immediacy and connection between viewers and characters, reiterated through the social media engagement that occurs simultaneous to the unfolding of the series, also explains the democratic narrative strategy of the *SKAM* enterprise. Yet the transition from character to character retains friendship as one of the key themes, and in season 1 it is female friendship in particular that is the primary source of drama for the protagonist, Eva. The opening episode begins with Eva sitting outside the high school with her boyfriend Giovanni as they discuss their respective coursework, until they are soon joined by a mutual friend Martino who ruptures the intimacy. Having established the couple as the central feature of the show and hinted at Eva's insecurity about Giovanni's attentions, we see a slow-motion shot of Eva watching two girls pass nearby. Eva attempts to wave timidly to the girls, in response to which one of them, her former best friend Laura, just smirks, while the other girl gives Eva the middle finger. The use of slow-motion of this shot, which then cuts to a close-up of Eva's crestfallen face, emphasizes this moment as emblematic of Eva's primary conflict: she is jealous of Giovanni's spending time with his friends because she herself does not have a strong female network, and she instead suffers overt hostility from Laura and other girls for reasons that will only be explained toward the end of the season.

As the program progresses it will continue to center upon the integration of Eva into a new circle of girlfriends, who will become the sounding board for her relationship issues but also her primary source of social interaction. Similar to how *L'amica geniale* includes as a primary narrative thread Lenù's decades-long attraction to Nino Sarratore, season 1 of *SKAM Italia* also places the love affair between Giovanni and Eva as the central narrative feature, and the season will culminate in Eva's decision to definitively terminate their relationship. Yet as viewers soon learn, Eva's preoccupation with Giovanni's suspected inconstancy is really masking a much more tortured internal struggle, which is her guilt over having started a sexual affair with Giovanni while he was dating her best friend, Laura. The most dramatic scene in the series occurs not in the final episode when Eva and Giovanni break up, but two episodes prior with Eva's long-awaited confrontation with Laura. Here a tearful Eva corners a

reticent Laura in a bathroom and breaks down as she recounts her initial loneliness at having been the new girl at school, and her joy that Laura, «la ragazza più figa della classe»⁸, had befriended her. As she confesses to Laura: «Io ti ho sempre ammirata...sei stata la migliore amica che io abbia mai avuto. E ancora adesso il pensiero di aver distrutto tutto mi fa stare malissimo».⁹ The reconciliation between the two girls allows Eva a space in which she can make peace with her past rivalries and even to form new female friendships. In fact immediately following this conversation Eva befriends Alice, another classmate unhappy with the state of her relationship who invites Eva to a «superfemminista» party to celebrate female singlehood. The reparation of female bonds is thus simultaneous with an increased independence from heterosexual romance, and the final scene of the season shows Eva, who has recently broken up with Giovanni, happily dancing and singing with her girlfriends while Giovanni and his friends look on. In this way *SKAM Italia* manages to eventually sublimate the heterosexual love plot in favor of a more sustained affirmation of the value of female friendship.

Mirroring Bodies and Female Intimacy

As we can see, female friendship becomes the dominant narrative feature in all three programs, and despite their many stylistic differences all three of these series employ similar tropes in their depictions of girlhood intimacies. First is the thematic use of mirrors, reflecting, and doubling amongst the female protagonists, both literally and figuratively. Terri Apter and Ruthellen Josselson observe that the mirror metaphor is used to portray how young women formulate their ideals of femininity through the gaze of the female friend, which in a psychoanalytic framework suggests that girls are not just incomplete in relation to men, but are in fact incomplete without their female friendships (APTER and JOSSELSOON 1999). This doubling also suggests that the girlfriends can exchange places, or are Janus-faced sides of the same coin. This kind of doubling is also achieved in the way these series juxtapose the female characters as light and dark. *Baby* capitalizes on the visual contrast between the blonde Chiara (whose name is hardly accidental) and the raven-haired Ludovica, oppositions that become played out as well in the categorization of

the girls' personalities. Chiara is initially presented as the personification of adolescent success: she is from a well-to-do family, popular at school, an exemplary student and a member of the track team. Ludovica, on the other hand, is academically challenged and lives in financially precarious circumstances with her single mother who receives little support from Ludovica's absent father. These types of contrasts appear as well in the personalities of Lila and Lenù in *L'amica geniale*, again with the casting of a dark-haired, olive-skinned Lila who is a visual contrast to the light-haired, blue-eyed Lenù. While both girls have similar economic and familial backgrounds, Lenù receives parental support to continue in her studies, whereas Lila must educate herself in secret despite the exigencies of her work obligations and her early marriage and motherhood. The *SKAM Italia* girls are also depicted through physical and emotional contrasts as well: of the three protagonists who each have a season dedicated to their narratives, the red-headed Eva also struggles with school, in contrast to the slim, dark-haired Eleonora who lives a regimented, well-ordered existence, and the strident Sana, who is a deeply religious Muslim and appears almost exclusively in dark clothing and a hijab. The other friends who complete the quintet include the ditzy, sexually available blonde Silvia and the heavy-set, playful Fede, two secondary characters whose main functions are to complement the triad and provide comic relief.

Danielle Hipkins observes the dialectical representation of female teens in categories of good girls or bad girls is omnipresent in Italian narratives onscreen, but also notes that combining or reversing these attributes via the trope of friendship may in fact enable a potential destabilizing of traditionally Manichean depictions of female adolescents on screen: «[I]n the wake of a postfeminist proliferation of depictions of female friendship, we witness much more attention to the potentially risky, or powerful possibilities of female bonds. One reason why we should consider carefully depictions of female friendship is for their potential to counteract the privileging of the lone, 'smart' girl» (HIPKINS 2015, 253). Hipkins goes on to wonder «whether depictions of female friendship can trouble that splitting», suggesting that binary categories of female comportment, which she observes is reaffirmed in some Italian feminist thought, are inherently limiting (IBID). If this is the case, the breakdown of oppositional depictions of female identity could be one of the

merits of the recent depictions of female adolescents in these television series. Indeed as we see in *Baby*, such inversions occur quite easily, as «good girl» Chiara is the friend who becomes most deeply attached to sex work whereas «bad girl» Ludovica begins to extricate herself much earlier, and in fact at the end of the series she is shown happily continuing her post-secondary studies in Paris (notably, in the company of another female friend), while Chiara is serving out a sentence in a youth detention center. While Lila may be configured as the more transgressive figure in *L'amica geniale*, Lenù's at times duplicitous nature comes forth in her dishonesty both with her boyfriend Antonio and with Lila herself; the girls' respective affairs with Nino Sarratore (which will be explored in future iterations of the series) also indicate that their positions can be more easily inverted than their personalities suggest. In *SKAM Italia* the alternation of narratives amongst the female protagonists allows space for them to attain the qualities of their friends. This becomes most evident in season 3 in which the «good girl» Eleonora begins to date Edoardo, Silvia's one-time lover, in another apparent rupture of the bonds of female friendship. In that series Eleonora's sense of self control is challenged after she is drugged at a party and awakens naked in bed with Edoardo's predatory brother. Terrified at the implications of the event, she goes with her girlfriends to seek medical advice at a clinic, and what follows is a wordless scene played out in slow-motion in which the viewer sees close-ups of a distraught Eleonora as she sits surrounded by the other girls who physically comfort her as they stand behind her. This scene mirrors a similar one in season 1 in which Silvia, afraid that she is pregnant, is taken to a woman's clinic by the same group of friends, who also stand behind her in solidarity and stroke her hair throughout her doctor's interview. Both scenes create parallels between previously disparate female personalities while also emphasizing a vision of female unity and friendship.

In all three programs simplistic oppositional portrayals of adolescent girls are shown to be unstable, with friendship being the one constant that prevails despite twists and inversions in character and storyline. Seen at another angle, the dialectical (or at times multiple) portrayals of girls in Italian television may have the possibility of working through more simplistic dichotomies to add complexity and texture to previously static engagement with female subjectivities. While these contrasts can be played out at a narrative level in

conflict and rivalry, they are also accompanied by equally if not more ubiquitous representations of female affection and love. In *L'amica geniale*, Lenù's voiceover narrates how often she not only attempts to emulate Lila, but the ways in which she wants to share her life's experiences with her. In *Baby* Ludovica and Chiara declare their affection frequently and with increasing intensity, as in the final season when Ludovica declares to Chiara: «Non sai quanto ti voglio bene».¹⁰ In *SKAM Italia* the girls at various turns are given opportunities to confirm their loyalty and dependence upon the female group, as in season 4 when a tearful Sana apologizes to the rest of the girlfriends for having alienated them: «Avevo paura di perdere la cosa più bella che mi era capitata...voi».¹¹ Such declarations give voice to the value of friendship as both a sustaining element in the lives of girls as well as a source of joy and passion.

In addition to the reinforcement of the emotional investment in female friendship, these series also display a consistent vision of female physical intimacy, an element that at times carries homoerotic undertones. In *L'amica geniale* and *Baby* in particular the intensity of the bonds between the female protagonists is expressed physically as well as verbally. In *L'amica geniale* we often see close-ups of the girls' hands or faces whenever they touch each other and embrace, and there is a moment of implied physical intimacy in one scene in which Lila encourages Lenù to take a bubble bath in her new apartment, and as Lenù lies in the tub enjoying this novel experience we see Lila languorously trailing her hands in the water as she sits nearby. *Baby* features numerous scenes in which Ludovica and Chiara embrace, strike sexy poses for each other to photograph, and lie together in bed in their undergarments while cuddling. In *SKAM Italia* lesbianism is not as overtly suggested in the relationships between the main group of friends, but the girls are extremely at ease with each other physically, often sharing a bed, undressing in front of each other, wearing each other's clothing, and cuddling together. The notion of female-female love as an alternative to heterosexual romance is raised, albeit sardonically, in season 1 when Alice invites Eva and her friends to a party for single girls who are «incazzate con il genere maschile»¹² and Eva comments: «Detto così sembra un po' serata da lelle!»,¹³ to which Alice responds: «Chi te l'ha detto che non sia la soluzione?».¹⁴ While the girls laugh jokingly, the comment gives voice to a

possibility that the series otherwise excludes from its depiction of female relationships.

While the girls in these shows all engage in a physicality that invokes lesbian intimacy, either as an affirmation of their emotional closeness or an open-ended suggestion of a potential homosexual attraction, these programs do not promote an overtly queer reading of female attachment. In fact all three shows resolutely affirm the heterosexual status of their female characters by focusing upon their female subjects' continued preoccupation with romantic relationships with males, even if ultimately those relationships are destined to terminate. All three shows also employ a strategy wherein a queer reading is rerouted by the presence of a gay male character who befriends the female protagonists and often acts as a confidant and go-between for the female friends: Alfonso in *L'amica geniale*; Martino and Filippo in *SKAM Italia*; and Fabio in *Baby*. All of these gay male characters act as a counterpoint to the more noxious forms of masculine domination that the female characters experience, offering the possibility of a female-male bond that is an alternative to the disappointments and, at times, abuses that the girls experience in their relationships with heterosexual men. These figures also reiterate the trend of cinematic and televisual depictions of straight female-gay male friendships, a phenomenon that Kathryn Hummel observes began in the 1980s and increased in the 21st century (HUMMEL 2011). Hummel interprets such depictions as threatening heteronormative constructions and opening possibilities for female transgression. However, while the dyadic construction of these friendships may be commonplace in contemporary film and television, it is not clear what these friendships indicate when they are configured as part of a triad that includes two straight female friends. What is also noticeably absent in all three series is the «safe eroticism», to use Baz Dreisinger's term, that characterizes the physical intimacy between the straight woman and her gay best friend (DREISINGER 2000). Indeed, in these three series the gay male friend almost appears as a decoy for the more intense friendship between the female characters. In this way, the triadic appearance of the gay male character in these series may constitute an inversion of Eve Sedgwick's observations of the literary trope of the erotic triangle in which the straight woman becomes a medium through which is channeled male-male homosexual desire (SEDGWICK 1985).

Here instead the non-heterosexual male appears to serve a similar function in mediating the female-female homosocial bond and providing an outlet for homosexuality that would relieve pressure from the lesbian subtext that may be implicit in these friendships. The resulting effect leaves open to varying interpretations of these series' use of the gay man: in one scenario, the simultaneous suggestion and negation of lesbian attraction affirms the presence of a lesbian continuum, to adopt Adrienne Rich's term, of female intimacy and love; in the second case, it signals a more regressive tendency in Italian popular television to stifle the possibility of female-female sexual desire.¹⁵

Conclusions

As such tropes and thematic overlaps demonstrate, these recent televisual meditations on girlhood and friendship provoke questions about why female subjectivity is becoming more prominent on Italian screens. One explanation could be found in the chronology of these three shows, all of which premiered in 2018. Just one year prior to their release the #MeToo movement had reached peak visibility not only in mainstream news platforms but also throughout social media, gaining currency with adult women and girls around the world (REMICK 2018). The focus on girlfriends at this particular moment suggests a deliberately female-centered response to #MeToo on Italian television, and an attempt to correct the movement's tepid or at times even hostile reception in Italy (GIOMI 2018). In the case of *L'amica geniale*, then-head of Rai Fiction Eleonora Andreatta affirmed that female subjectivity was vital to the series and that state television networks had an ethical impetus to address these issues, when she noted that Ferrante's work constituted «one of the most powerful and universal stories of female friendship» and that by adapting Ferrante's books to television Rai was affirming that this series «belongs to the realm of what European public service television does» (VIVARELLI 2017).

The didactic imperative of directly addressing issues pertaining to girls also lies at the heart of *SKAM Italia* and is expressed in the publicized objective of the Norwegian original, which is «to help 16-year-old girls strengthen their self-esteem through dismantling taboos, making them aware of interpersonal

mechanisms and showing them the benefits of confronting their fears» (quoted in SHANKE 2021, 60). This affirmation of the series' intention to relate specifically to female viewers in particular is notable, considering that at least one season is devoted to male protagonists. The stated intention of *SKAM* to speak to issues confronting young women is felt throughout its international iterations, and *SKAM Italia* recycles the narratives of the Norwegian original to mirror the complex issues teens face while also offering positive resolutions, all of which are found in the affirmation of friendship and peer solidarity.

There is no such salutary objective apparent with the series *Baby*, a series that is intended to appeal a broad range of Netflix subscribers. Indeed the program takes a nihilistic approach in its negative vision of the corrupt and hypocritical adult world for which the teens are preparing, even though the series' more optimistic conclusion suggests a path towards self-acceptance and self-determination for the female protagonists. The show's depiction of sex work also received sharp criticism from organizations such as the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, which argued that *Baby* glorified teen sex trafficking (NCSE 2018). Certainly the glamorization of the female stars, along with the emphasis on their fashionable clothing and makeup, does provide a more seductive depiction of the high-class milieu in which their sexual exploitation takes place. However, *Baby* takes pains to elaborate the psychological motivations that would lead the protagonists to sex work, placing emphasis on parental neglect, social ostracism, and masculine exploitation as factors that contribute to Chiara and Ludovica's slow but inexorable fall into prostitution. Indeed the only scenes that depict the girls as joyful, carefree, and emotionally gratified are the ones in which they are alone together. In this way, *Baby* could be providing a similarly didactic approach by privileging Chiara and Ludovica's friendship as proof of the show's validation of female perspectives. As one of the show's writer's affirmed, the series is «a story about love, not prostitution» (TANNENBAUM 2018).

The success of these three series both domestically and with international audiences reflects growing representation of female subjectivities not just on Italian screens but in television production worldwide. While television narratives that emphasize female solidarity and intimacy may form a welcome response to the otherwise hegemonic presence of male narratives on television,

there is the danger that girlhood and female friendship in Italian television may be further examples of the marketing and consumption of postfeminist sensibilities in a global televisual marketplace. Alison Winch has astutely observed the way advertisers across digital media exploit the trope of female friendship to «promote the intimacy of female networks and the pleasures of belonging to a ‘we’» (WINCH 2015, 230). As she warns, these images are harnessed to affirm a white, heteronormative vision of female identity, one that rests upon the visual exploitation of the female image and whose end result is to stimulate in women and girls a desire to consume: «Emotions and relationalities such as identification, jealousy and rivalry are encouraged in the context of promotional cultures as desirable and strategic forms of relating» (234). Although these female-centered productions are not overtly complicit in marketing tie-ins, they can reflect the troublesome connection between girlhood intimacies as a new form of branding strategy. As Martinussen, Wetherell and Braun warn, «the radical potential of friendships between women can be lost when female togetherness is performed through tropes of postfeminist empowerment and risks instead becoming a significant part of the machinery of contemporary patriarchal capitalism» (MARTINUSSEN, WETHERELL, BRAUN 2020, 5). Therefore, even as *L'amica geniale*, *Baby* and *SKAM Italia* rely on images of female self-determination, and at times even invoke terms such as «femminismo» within their narratives, it is difficult to be completely heartened by the preponderance of female friendships on Italian screens and to accept it as proof of a more genuine interest in female-centered narratives, especially as the calculated repositioning of Italian televisual narratives came at a moment when the Italian film industry was itself coming under attack for its treatment of women both onscreen and off (O'RAWE 2018). So even if we have progressed beyond *bambole*, one question that remains is how committed Italian television is to exploring female friendship in a neoliberal, postfeminist age.

Notes

¹ The published English translation of the book is *My Brilliant Friend*.

² «Whatever you do, I do too». This and all subsequent translations from the Italian are mine.

³ «I wanted to be penetrated, I wanted to say to Lila when she came back: «I'm not a virgin anymore either; *whatever you do, I do too*, you won't manage to leave me behind».

⁴ «If you're sixteen and you live in the most beautiful neighborhood in Rome, you're lucky. Ours is the best of all possible words. We're swimming in this beautiful aquarium, but we dream of the sea. That's why in order to survive we need a secret life».

⁵ «And that's how to throw away centuries of feminist struggle with one video».

⁶ «The Crazy Girls».

⁷ «Hours...hundreds, thousands of hours, of doing nothing, of trying to please others».

⁸ «The coolest girl in class»

⁹ «I've always admired you...you were the best friend I'd ever had. And even now the thought of having ruined everything makes me feel awful».

¹⁰ «You have no idea how much I care about you».

¹¹ «I was afraid of losing the greatest thing that had happened to me—you».

¹² «Pissed off with the male sex».

¹³ «Said that way it sounds like a dyke party!».

¹⁴ «Whoever said that might not be the answer?».

¹⁵ A unique exception, and one worthy of further analysis, is the representation of Sofia, the lesbian best friend of the female protagonist Summer, in *Summertime* (NETFLIX, 2020-present). However, even in that case the series makes it clear that any romantic attraction between the two girls is strictly one-sided.

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